

Eavesdrop On Phones Described

3/20/78
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ANNAPOLIS, March 19—A former telephone company employee testified today that he and other workers at a Baltimore office regularly listened in on the conversations of local prostitutes, members of the Students for a Democratic Society and various antiwar groups, and any others they found interesting.

Stephen Blumenthal, 21, of West Orange, N.J., a senior at Johns Hopkins University, told the Senate Judicial Proceedings Subcommittee that the monitoring of calls was not done maliciously but rather to alleviate "the boredom of an evening."

Blumenthal said he worked part time as a telephone repair clerk at the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company's University Test Center from last September until he quit in mid-February. His duties did not involve using the equipment to cut into any phone lines, but Blumenthal said the procedure was easy to learn just by observing."

The center's equipment, used to pinpoint damage in the telephone company's cable network, enables workmen to cut in on any line on six exchanges serving northeast Baltimore, including Johns Hopkins. A company spokesman said there are 33,545 phones on the six exchanges.

"Several hundred people work in that building, and any one of them is potentially capable of using that equipment," Blumenthal testified today.

"The plain, cold hard fact is that in the boredom of the evening, some of the deskmen would cut in on the local chapter of SDS to see what's happening. There are a couple of houses of ill repute in that area and they liked to monitor them, too.

"Occasionally, . . . I'd pick up the phone myself. I liked to monitor the whorehouses. I heard about some of the wildest perversions I've ever heard of in my life."

Company regulations forbid

this, he said, but were not strictly enforced. Security was so lax, he said, that he had no trouble getting into the files of unlisted numbers, containing what he said were the phone numbers of various public officials including state Attorney General Francis B. Burch and Johns Hopkins University President Lincoln Gordon.

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In addition to eavesdropping on the SDS, Blumenthal said, many of his coworkers also monitored the phones of the Peace Action Committee, an antiwar group. SDS and other militant organizations have often charged that their phones are tapped or monitored.

John Schisler, public relations spokesman for the telephone company in Baltimore, received word of Blumenthal's testimony incredulously.

"Oh, wonderful," he groaned during a telephone interview.

"The company does have very strict rules protecting the privacy of communications. These rules are reviewed regularly with each and every employee and any violation results in prompt dismissal of the employee. I think that we're all very fortunate that Steve Blumenthal is no longer with the telephone company.

He said that there are "any number of federal laws against illegal interception of phone calls," and that employees have been dismissed in the past for listening in illegally on conversations. He could

give no overall number, but said one person was fired for such a violation last year.

Blumenthal testified today that he had not broken any federal law because "I didn't tap the phone—I used regular phone company equipment."

His testimony was given on a bill, sponsored by Sen. Julian L. Lapides (D-Baltimore), that would make it illegal for a phone company employee to monitor or record any conversation unless he announces his presence on the line.

Anyone found guilty of vio-

lating the law could be jailed for up to three months and fine \$500. The Committee took no action, and the members heard the testimony virtually without comment.

Blumenthal said he agreed to testify voluntarily because of his concern over the "potential dangers" involved in illegal monitoring of phone conversations, including blackmail and the interception of trade and government secrets. He said he felt that criminal penalties, over and above company regulations, would make a person "stop and think" before monitoring a call.

Orville Wright, lobbyist for the phone company, made no immediate response to Blumenthal's testimony. He testified that the proposed bill was unnecessary.

The only monitoring permitted by the company, he said, is in what he termed "service observing" procedures in which supervisors listen to operators' conversations with customers to see "if our guys and gals are doing the job. The purpose is quality control."